Covert Unit Disclosed to Australians

Manchester Guardian

CANBERRA — Liberal former Prime Minister William McMahon has revealed the cryptic title of a top-secret security organization, Mo-9, previously unknown to Australians.

McMahon referred to the organization three times during a television interview but refused to discuss its operations.

The revelation seems certain to escalate the ruling Labor Party's growing demands for a full examination of security and intelligence operations. It was only 18 months ago that the existence of ASIS, the Australian Secret Intelligent Service, came to light.

The right-wing news magazine, the Bulletin, recently published a long report on a 1971 security assessment of Jim Cairns, the deputy prime minister, from the files of ASIO, the Australian Security Intelligence Organization.

The fourth known member of the security family is JIO, the Joint Intelligence Organization within the defense department, seals in strategic assessments and information. ASIO is supposed to be limited to domestic intelligence connected with possible subversive activity.

The government refuse to talk about ASIS, but it appears to be primarily and perhaps solely concerned with gathering intelligence overseas. It's existence became known when the precipitate withdrawal of Australian troops from Singapore last year uncovered a secret signals unit whose job was to monitor military and diplomatic radio traffic in the region for JIO and ASIS assessment.

There is a marked reluctance among officials even to confirm the existence of MO-9. But it, too, maintains a network of operatives outside Australia, according to the little information available.

It is said to deal in "purely factual" information about any country in which Australia has an interest. MO-9 agents are briefed to gather industrial, political and some military intelligence as the basis for long-term assessments, but not to attempt to influence events.

Prime Minister Gough Whitlam already has instituted an inquiry into ASIO to be conducted by a Supreme Court judge. This was started late last year. There are now suggestions that the inquiry be widened to cover the entire intelligence establishment.

The dossier on Deputy Prime Minister Cairns leaked to the press was prepared during McMahon's term, but he disclaimed any knowledge of it.

"If I had known that the activities of a member of Parliament were under scrutiny by ASIO I would have immediately taken action to see that it stopped, and that what records there were, were destroyed," he said.

Liberal Party Sen. Ivor Greenwood, who was attorney general at the time was responsible for ASIO, has also disclaimed knowledge of the file but defended it as a legitimate activity of the organization.